

God's Covenant With Abraham

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[0 : 00] Genesis 15, and we'll read from verse 1. Then the word of the Lord came to him, This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.

He took him outside and said, Look up at the sky and count the stars, if indeed you can count them. Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be.

Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited to him as righteousness. He also said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.

But Abraham said, Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it? So the Lord said to him, Bring me a heifer, a goat, and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.

Abraham brought all these to him, cut them in two, and arranged the halves opposite each other. The birds, however, he did not cut in half. The birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abraham drove them away.

[1 : 36] As the sun was setting, Abraham fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the Lord said to him, Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and that they will be enslaved and ill-treated there.

But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham and said, To your descendants I give this land, from the wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Cadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Gergashites, and Jebusites. Okay, let's pause for a moment and ask for God's help as we look at this passage together. Father, we thank you for your word, and we recognize that it's from a different time, but yet we also recognize that it is relevant for us.

[3 : 05] Please help us to connect those two things, that these words written thousands of years ago have relevance for us today. Please speak to us now by your Spirit.

In Jesus' name, Amen. So we come to the covenant. Now, I don't know, how do you make a commitment to somebody else?

How do you commit and agree to do something for someone else? Maybe by text. Maybe you get a text or a WhatsApp to say, would you like to meet for coffee? And you reply and you say, yes. What time? Ten o'clock, maybe you just do a thumbs up. And you meet them there. Simple as that. Maybe in person. Maybe we make plans together or we make an agreement and we might shake hands to say, it's a deal.

Let's do that. Or maybe a pinky promise. The most serious of them all. Or maybe we sign contracts. Maybe we're getting a loan from the bank.

[4 : 08] Or we've just bought a house. Or we've started a new job. So we sign on the dotted line to make a deal. Well, a covenant is like this.

It's a solemn promise or agreement. A covenant is a solemn promise or agreement. And one of the closest that we might be familiar with is Christian marriage.

Where a man and a woman, they make solemn promises before God and commit to each other until death separates us. Well, today we witness a covenant made by God with Abraham.

And this is no ordinary covenant. This is a hugely important one. It's the promise from God that kicks off salvation history through Israel to Jesus.

It's the promise that is relied on by the Israelites throughout the Old Testament. And it is the promise that displays the way God works for his people by grace.

[5 : 19] So first thing this morning is God has the power to make amazing promises. God has the power to make amazing promises. We see in this chapter, we're reminded that Abram did not have any children.

He was very old. His wife Sarai was very old and they had no hope of having children. So they had some backup plans for the inheritance. Who would inherit all of Abram's estate?

Well, this man, Eliezer of Damascus, Abram's servant, would be their heir. Well, Abram's not very happy about this. But God makes two promises to Abram in this chapter that are amazing.

The promise of a son and descendants. And the promise of a land for his descendants to inherit. Imagine what Abram must have been thinking or feeling.

He was about 100 years old and had no children. And God said, I will give you a son. In fact, Abram, come here.

[6 : 29] Come out with me. Come outside. Look at the sky. Look up at the sky. And he showed him the stars. Now, we haven't moved far from when we were living in Bandon down to West Cork.

But the stars are way clearer down here. The light pollution seems to be gone so that on a clear night, you look up at the stars and it's incredible.

You can't begin to count how many there are. And this is what God is saying to Abram. Abram, look at the stars. Try and count them. You can't.

That's what your descendants will be like. You won't even be able to count them. And he goes on to promise of a land to possess.

All these nations we saw at the end of the chapter. A land occupied by foreign and hostile nations. These were amazing promises.

[7 : 30] Well, you see, God has the power to make amazing promises. He is the sovereign Lord of creation and history.

He is powerful to do what he says. How good is your word? Some people are good at keeping promises.

Others aren't so good. In Ireland, perhaps we are guilty of just saying what people want to hear. But not really following through on what we say. Is that fair?

Or is that unfair? Well, an example of this is I remember back in my college days, we were part of the Christian union. And we used to try to invite people to come to an event that we might hold. So we'd entice them with tea and coffee on campus.

And we'd say we're running this event next Tuesday night. Would you love to come? And we'd say, oh yeah, that'd be great. That sounds brilliant. I'd love to come. And then they don't show up at all.

[8 : 31] Or maybe we're used to politicians in our country making promises, but they don't follow through. Maybe you spoke to your TD or you wrote to them about a particular issue.

And you said, I really want you to vote in this way. And they said, yes, I will. I will vote this way. But then their party says, no, no, no. No, you won't.

And they don't follow through. Well, God has the power and authority to make these promises and to follow through. Abraham recognizes God's control and power in verse 2 when he calls him sovereign Lord.

He recognizes that God is in control of all things. God follows up on the blessing that he gives in chapter 12 of Genesis.

That he would make Abraham into a great nation. That his descendants would be as uncountable as the stars. And the Lord would give his descendants a land to possess. These are the foundational promises of the Old Testament that start this salvation journey.

[9 : 44] It all starts with Abraham. And it all starts with a promise. Not with rules. Not with laws. But with a promise.

This covenant relationship between Yahweh and Abraham was one of promise by grace. We'll see in a couple chapters the sign of circumcision will come.

And we'll see in a few centuries' time, hopefully we'll get there before then here, the law is introduced. But here, it's a promise.

And it's by grace. God is powerful to make these promises. He is the sovereign Lord of the universe to promise these descendants. To promise this land.

And he can follow through on what he says. For us, we see these promises and we understand that they have grown and been fulfilled.

[10:46] And the amazing promises that God offers to us are many. He offers us the promise of eternal life. Life that never ends.

The promise of life without suffering. But only fullest joy. The promise of perfect relationships forever with him and with others.

And the promise of help and strength right now as we wait for that future home. God makes amazing promises and he has the power to keep them.

Well, Abraham knew this. Abraham knew that God was powerful to keep his word. And he took God at his word. It's the second thing I want us to remember.

We must take God at his word. He is absolutely trustworthy. The promises that God made to Abraham were amazing.

[11:51] They were that he would have a son even though he was old. And not only that, his descendants would be as uncountable as the stars. Well, how did Abraham respond?

Okay, God. I believe you. Look at verse 6. Abraham believed the Lord and he credited to him as righteousness.

Abraham took God at his word. We must take God at his word. Faith is the only path to righteousness.

God made these amazing promises and Abraham believed that those things would come to pass. That God would do it. And God did an amazing thing following Abraham's belief.

He credited it to him as righteousness. Through Abraham's response of faith, he found immediate acceptance with God.

[12:57] He simply believed that what God said was true. And his relationship with God was secure. Nothing he had to do. He just believed God.

And he was accepted by him. Accepted as righteous. This is an incredible moment in Genesis. In the Old Testament. In fact, the whole Bible, where so early on in Scripture, someone demonstrates faith and is accepted by God.

Where was the law? Where are the rules? Where is the command of circumcision? Nowhere. No law. No rules. Relationship with God was on the basis of faith responding to God's grace.

Does that sound familiar? Relationship with God is on the basis of faith responding to God's grace. Not by what we do or who we are.

Simply on the basis of taking God at his word. We don't always take people at their word, do we? We might hear something they say.

[14:16] Maybe we're disappointed when we do. We've been getting some jobs done around our new house. And we've learned that it's better not to take tradesmen at their word.

If we do, we are often disappointed. And often there are genuine reasons. But dealing with builders and tradesmen is a difficult path to navigate, isn't it?

We can't always take people at their word. But we must take God at his word. He is absolutely trustworthy. And we have the benefit, different to Abraham, of history.

To see that after God spoke these promises to Abraham, Abraham's descendants did become too great to count. They were given the land. Abraham didn't have that.

But how did he respond? He believed. So when God speaks in his word, and he tells us that Jesus is God, that he's the only way to the Father, we must take him at his word.

[15:22] Faith is the only path to righteousness. Not what we do or who we are. Only faith in response to God's grace. And what will God do for us?

He will credit to us as righteousness. Listen carefully to this. It's not a trick. If we hear the good news that Jesus is God, that he died and rose to rescue us, and we say, okay God, I believe.

Then God credits us with perfect righteousness. Perfect righteousness.

Have you ever got the credit for what someone else did? Maybe in work or at home. Maybe someone in the office came up with this great new initiative in your team meeting, and you suggested it to your manager, your boss.

He loved it. He thought it was a brilliant idea. He said, Tom, that is an amazing idea. Well, hopefully you said who had the idea originally. Or maybe someone else got the credit for what you did.

[16:40] You tidied up the kids' room again. And maybe your husband or your wife comes in and sees the tidy room and says, well done, kids. You've tidied everything up.

Well, by faith in Jesus, we get credited with his goodness and his righteousness before God. What he has done counts for us. We are treated as Jesus is treated by God. It's amazing. We're declared righteous in God's eyes. All wrong and evil and sin is dealt with. And we are accepted by God as sons and daughters.

And all we need to do is pray every day and read the Bible all the time and give lots of money away and be really not... No. Nothing.

[17:38] We didn't need any of that. All we need to do is believe what God says. And he will credit it to us as righteousness.

Paul refers in Romans to this verse in verse 6. In Romans 4, he says, The words it was credited to him were not written for him alone, but also for us.

To whom God will credit righteousness for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. Imagine that. These words written thousands of years ago were written for you.

They're written for me. So we can see how God deals with people who believe him. We must take God at his word.

He can be trusted completely and he credits those who believe him with righteousness. This is how amazing our God is. So third and finally, we see that God is serious about keeping his word.

[18:54] Even to death. The final part of our passage is quite unusual, isn't it? After the Lord explains that he will give the land to Abram, Abram asks, How can I know?

How can I be sure that I can gain possession of this land? And God says, let me show you. And so begins an ancient and mysterious ceremony.

It's a ceremony that confirms and ratifies the promises and covenant that God is making. We mentioned earlier about a wedding, about a marriage.

Well, a wedding has a ceremony, doesn't it? And there are certain parts of the ceremony that make it official. There's the part where people are given the opportunity to object.

There are the vows that are given and shared between the husband and wife-to-be. There is the signing of the legal document to confirm that this marriage is legitimate.

[20:03] Even the person conducting the wedding needs to be official. So this ceremony was God making this covenant official.

This ceremony, let's look at what's going on again in verse 9. The Lord said, bring me a heifer, a goat, and a ram, along with a dove and a young pigeon.

So Abram brought all these to them, cut them in two, arranged the halves opposite each other. And verse 12, as the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.

Verse 17, when the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. What on earth is going on here?

Well, this is God demonstrating how serious he is about keeping his word, even to death.

[21:10] So Abram gets these animals, he cuts them in half, and he arranges the pieces almost like an aisle. Maybe this would be a nice idea for a wedding. No? Well, we get a glimpse of this meaning in Jeremiah chapter 34.

Just a little glimpse in verse 18. It says, those who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces.

So it seems as if this was a covenant that a covenant was sometimes made in the ancient times. Which basically said, I am committing to this relationship, this agreement, and if I break the covenant, let the same fate befall me as did to these animals.

This is serious stuff. I don't think I'd want to walk between animals like this. Well, Abram arranged the pieces, and then does Abram walk through?

No. He doesn't. Verse 17 says, This is an incredible moment where God appears visibly.

[22:36] There's a word that describes when this happens. It's called a theophany. When God appears, like in the burning bush with Moses, He appeared in the flames.

Or like on Mount Sinai when He descended in the cloud. Or remember the pillar of fire that guided the Israelites. This is a theophany, a visible manifestation of God.

And here He appears as a smoking firepot and blazing torch. And it's the Lord who passes through the pieces.

Not Abram. This is God making His covenant with Abram. This is God's promise, God's covenant, God's grace to Abram.

He is the one who undertook to make the promise and to ensure it was fulfilled. Even to death. This is how serious God is about keeping His word.

[23 : 44] We can trust Him. And you know, God was put to death. Not because He broke this covenant promise.

But because He made this promise. God in the flesh. Jesus. The ultimate theophany.

The ultimate manifestation of God. He died on a cross. To rescue us from sin and evil. And to provide for us not just a geographical land that we can inherit and live in.

But an eternal home forever. The entire world and His new creation will be ours for those who trust Him.

God has never failed. And He never will. Because He is so serious about keeping His word.

Remember, God is the one who has committed Himself to this covenant.

[24 : 51] To do what needs to be done to bring salvation. It's all of Him. And He calls us to respond in faith.

And we can rest in that. We can rest. Easy. Knowing that He is the one who walked through those pieces.

Who said, I am the one who will keep this covenant. I am committed to saving you. To keeping you. To rescuing you.

To bringing you home forever. So we can throw off those burdens about achievement. Or status. Or work.

Or good deeds. And we rest. Knowing that Jesus has done it all. And we simply respond.

[25 : 47] By saying, okay God. I believe. Thank you. God is who He says He is. And that He has. And will do.

What He has said. Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you so much for your word. And how we are reminded.

That these words are for us. That these words were written down. So that today. In Skibberine. We would read them.

And we would see what you do. When we respond in faith. We thank you that you made these promises. That you are the one who committed to keeping them.

And Lord, we see ultimately fulfilled. In your Son Jesus coming. Dying for us. And Father, we pray for help to respond. Just as Abram did here.

[26 : 46] To simply believe. And Lord, we thank you that you credit us with righteousness. Lord, we love you. And we thank you for what you have done for us.

We praise you in Jesus name. Amen. We are going to close by responding in prayer. Amen. Amen.

God help you. Amen. Weesaños.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.